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AUTHOR Phillips, Jerry
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ABSTRACT

Three adult males met 2 hours a week for 26 weeks in a non-academic setting to explore writing. Adult One (A-1) and Adult Two (A-2) were limestone miners and close friends. Adult Three (A-3) had some limited academic writing experience, so A-1 and A-2 thought that he knew more about what made writing effective. A-3 observed the others' writing processes, recording verbal exchanges, making field notes, and then analyzing the data. Patterns emerged in A-1 and A-2's writing. They each began with an "idea," the core of a story to be transferred through writing to an audience. Next, A-1 and A-2 used legal pads to write a first draft. The aim of a second draft was to "dress up" the initial draft. Further drafts were prepared in successive steps. In the critique stage, both writers either would search for someone to read and evaluate their work or would critique each other's work. Eventually, both writers would prepare a draft intended for the final destination, whether that was a peer review group or a publisher. Next came the time of heartache and frustration, bringing rejection slips. Each writer's process was in constant change, but each learned and improved through peer interaction. Perhaps writing teachers can be more effective if they suggest to students that there is more than one way to write. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SG)

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Exploring writing with non-academics

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By

Jerry Phillips
Assistant Professor
Reading Education

Department of Education
University of Arkansas
Monticello, AR 71655
(501) 460-1362

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Exploring writing with non-academics

DiPardo and Freeman (1988) call for more research into peer talk and the writing process. Peer groups have existed and been studied since the late nineteenth century (Gere, 1987). However, most of this research was conducted in academic settings ranging from early school children to college students. Gere and Stevens (1985) and Gere and Abbott (1985) compared the language of writing groups across fifth, eighth, and eleventh grade levels. Freedman (1987) and Freedman and Bennett (1987) studied two ninth grade writing classes. Nystrand (1986) and Nystrand and Brandt (in press) studied two hundred and fifty students participating in thirteen college-level classrooms. Newkirk (1984) studied ten students at the university level, and Berkenkotter (1984) examined response groups on the college level. These studies have added to our knowledge about the writing process, but there is more to be done. Therefore, this paper explores talk among three adults in order to better understand the writing processes adults support.

Circumstances

Three adults met to explore writing two hours a week for twenty-six weeks in a non-academic setting. Adult One (A-1) described his past as being shattered by divorce, unemployment and an inability to hold steady work. A-1 worked at a limestone mine during the meetings. He writes stories about childhood experiences to mail to his parents in Missouri. Adult Two (A-2) worked at the same mine. He wrote

a science fiction novel, but cannot get it published after eight years of trying. A-1 and A-2 are close friends. I (A-3) had limited academic writing experience, but understood and favored Elbow (1981) and Murray's (1987) approach to writing. The three of us lived in the same community and our common rural community background helped us relate to each other. We became more open with each other when we discovered that we also spoke a common language.

From field notes:

> A-2 told me that he is thinking about taking up the ministry. He wanted to know if this would interfere with writing together. I don't see how it would. A-2 asked that A-1 and I attend a Sunday service to listen to him bring the message. We agreed.

A-1 and A-2 fought an internalized bias, thinking that I knew more about what makes writing effective. They constantly tried to please me, but I attempted to satisfy their concerns and believe that I was successful.

Rockville Text 1

A-1: Well, you can get out the wet noodle.
A-3: What?
A-2: What he means is that he didn't have time to do any writing this week.
A-1: That's right. I'm sorry. You can put me in the dog-house.
A-3: Don't worry about it. We've plenty of time.

A-1 and A-2 brought the beginning of a story to the first meeting, and the three of us worked together to extend their beginnings to a finished product. Along the way we wrote query letters, proposals, outlines, and several drafts of the original story.

We sat at a "writing table" with a tape-recorder nearby. The following is an example of talk caught by the recorder.

Rockville Text 2

A-1: Why do I think I am having so much trouble?
A-3: With the query letter or the paragraph?
A-1: The query letter and the first paragraph.
A-3: For the article?
A-1: Yeah. I think the reason I'm having so much trouble is because I am trying to cram so much into so small a space.
A-3: What do you mean?
A-1: Well, trying to put everything I am wanting to say in one paragraph or one letter or one page. Now on this one, A-2 and I worked together. A-2 did a good job. He wrote the first part and I wrote the last. This is the handwritten one.

At the end of each meeting we suspended activities and prepared for the next one. Here, we are working on a query, trying to meet A-2's self imposed mailing deadline.

Rockville Text 3

A-3: Let's shut this thing down.
A-2: Check this out right quick. "Competition in the publishing industry is becoming more intense each year. The number of new writers is increasing and as a result creative writing courses are becoming more popular. However, many new writers hesitate to enroll in such classes for various reasons such as time or money and their faith in their own work. A good writing."
A-3: Lack of faith in their own work. No, that's not right. You're right.
A-2: "A good writing course is beneficial, but every writing course is a good writing course." Paragraph. "I am proposing an article for your magazine written for beginning writers." Targeting maybe would be better. "Targeting beginning writers." Target. Maybe a title, "Pitfalls of writing courses."
A-1: How about "avoid?" Would it fit in there? "Proposing an article for your magazine written for beginning writers to help avoid some of the pitfalls."
A-2: I got something that I can build on during the week.

Methods of Data Collection

First, I used a tape recorder to catch verbal exchanges and other participant noises (Ives, 1987), presented a transcription print-out to A-1 and A-2 for review, and asked them to read, make corrections or amplifications. They returned the copy with alterations. At times, they deleted words and added further explanations. I made corrections and asked them to re-check the transcript. They never returned a second copy for additional corrections.

Second, I wrote field notes after each meeting. I kept a pad close to list key words and phrases (Spradley 1979), thought to be helpful when writing field notes. I used the pad and the tapes for reference when writing the field notes. The files contain sixteen sets of field notes. I printed copies of the field notes, and gave them to A-1 and A-2 to read, make corrections or amplifications. They always made corrections and additions on the field notes.

Third, I collected the writings brought to and developed away from the writing table. These materials included both uncritiqued and critiqued writing. I then divided the data into physical and transcribed categories. The physical category contained stories, query letters and proposals. The transcribed category contained the tape recordings and the field notes.

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

I employed Tesch's (1990) multi-step model for developing an organizing system, Seidel's (1988) software The

Ethnograph to manage the data and Jone's (1985) inductive mapping techniques to analyze it. A triangulation process captured a more complete, holistic, and contextual picture of the study (Jick, 1979) in that A-1: and A-2 also examined the data. I managed the study and commanded the final responsibility, but shared the direction of the triangulation with A-1: and A-2. Their input during the study, and during the analysis of the data placed them in the unique position of contributing to the findings.

Exploring the writing process

A-1 and A-2 support a writing process that at first glance appears to be sequenced and staged. A closer inspection, however, reveals an overlapping and backtracking process. They acknowledge a sequence of behaviors and activities during writing, but are not in agreement on the order of sequences. In the following, I use the term "step" to explain the writing sequences they choose during this study.

In step one, A-1 and A-2 share a common belief about their first writing event. At the center of this event is an "idea," the core of a story to be transferred through writing to an audience. In order to transfer, both use a continual writing practice strategy as they try to create idea reality and audience awareness. They feel that they must believe in their stories to be able to make an audience believe in them. Thus, the story built around an idea is basic to their approach, but at this point, they differ in philosophy.

A-2 believes the story should also be important to someone else, be written to satisfy intended audience, and has audience foremost in mind when writing. A-1 suggests that if the story is important enough to him, it will, therefore, become important to an audience at some point during the writing of the story. For these two, developing the idea means molding abstraction with imagination to please the writer, and they employ certain writing strategies accordingly, constructing lists of ideas and continually writing idea memos. Many times story ideas "pop" into their heads, that is, stories originate in their mind. However, their writing does not always mirror their ideas.

Rockville Text 4

A-2: The idea just popped in my mind and I started writing. I thought that sounded pretty good, there would be a lot of people who would like to hear that.

At other times, they write titles to help remember original thoughts about ideas. As the idea develops, conceptual theories begin to form around the idea, and they then further develop their theories through more writing. However, they differ in theory development. A-2 believes good writing happens with or without audience understanding. Tom believes writing must be believable to be considered good writing.

Rockville Text 5

A-2: Like I said, I can write a story that just I like. Anybody can write. They all have stories that they can tell and only they can tell them, but learning to tell that story where other people would be interested in it would be something else.

A-1: I disagree with A-2 on that. I think that anything that is important enough to you that you want to write about

it, you should write about that and not worry about what the public thinks. If it's believable, it's good writing as far as I'm concerned..

In step two, the initial draft, A-1: and A-2 use a legal pad to write their first draft. In cursive they create characters, scenes, and settings. However, the similarities soon end. A-1 profits from cursive because he types slow, but A-2, a self described fast typist, uses cursive only because his typewriter is broken. A-2 doesn't know where the story will end when he starts writing. A-1 does know where his story will end, but is unsure of where his writing will lead before he gets to the end.

Rockville Text 6

A-1: I'm trying to set up the scene. Trying to set up everything for the rest of the story. I know the mechanics on it needs work, but to get my scene out of my head, I don't have time to worry about petty stuff. I know how it ends because we lived in the country for ten years. My book is going to be about those ten years, so yeah, I know how it is going to end. I don't know how it is going to be wrote, but I know how it is going to end.

A-1 and A-2 believed that if the writing quality is there, everything else will fall in line, but employed different strategies to purchase quality. A-2 underlines exclamatory words to show intent, supports audience awareness assurance through reminders to change "this or that" to maintain an adequate balance of sentences and paragraphs to commensurate editors and publishers. A-2 described writing a scene.

Rockville Text 7

A-2: Writing in what I call a scene. That's basically what I try to do. I have a scene in mind and when I'm writing, I can see it all in my mind, just like watching a movie. I try to be descriptive in describing, maybe the smell

of things or the sounds. This is something else I need to know, how to go into an effective scene, the guideline to go into an effective scene. Well, I know that it has to keep the reader interested and want to go to something else. That's the law, but I imagine, probably, there is a most effective way to do that. I know they are just characters in a book, but I look at them as real people.

A-1 likes to write scenes that suggest and then leave the rest to the reader's imagination.

Rockville Text 8

A-1: In that, maybe coming to suggestions. You could use that to your advantage. You know, having a scene that suggests and then leave it to the reader's imagination.

A-1 writes until time is depleted, and upon returning, builds on previous writing. He seldom edits existing writing until the story is finished.

In step three, the second draft, the first draft of writing has to be "dressed up." Dressing up means "fixing it" to help create audience acceptance.

Rockville Text 9

A-1: I still say that what I have to say is mine and if it's interesting to me, there is someone out there who I need to dress it up for then I need to get it to the point where they want to read it.
A-2: I'm like A-1, the dressing it up, make it presentable.

A-1 and A-2 edit the first draft in red ink to better see the changes for the second draft. During the second draft, A-2 "goes through" the first draft, reads it silently, and makes changes.

Rockville Text 10

A-2: Doing this, going through the mechanics, makes me a better writer. Dressing it up makes it presentable, but doesn't change the story.

After A-1 finishes writing the first draft, he "reads it over" silently to see where changes need to be made.

Rockville Text 11

A-1: There are always changes. I know very little about mechanics and I'm a terrible speller. I'm a story teller and depend on others to help me fix my stories.

For both of these writers, the second draft is not finished until they read it and make changes.

In step four, the third draft, A-2 re-writes again in long hand according to the changes.

Rockville Text 12

A-2: I have to watch what I'm doing here. I know that I got mad at my wife one time, and lo and behold, my character got mad at each other. I had to watch out. If I didn't want my characters to get mad at each other, I had to stay away from my wife.

A-1 makes changes during the typing process. A-1 does his own typing on a word processor. As he types, A-1 sometimes adds changes to the second draft or comes up with other exciting ideas for other stories.

Rockville Text 13

A-1: I was telling A-2 that I really think that there are two stories here. The cow, the milking scene and then the hunting scene.

At this point, A-1's is ready to allow someone else to read his writing, and will make no more changes until he receives input. However, A-2 makes additional drafts.

In step five, the fourth draft, A-2 types the third draft using different typewriters around town, sometimes at a church, sometimes at place of employment.

Rockville Text 14

A-2: The bosses said that they didn't care as long as I get my job done.

This is A-2's final draft unless he decides to make changes. A-1 seldom produces a fourth draft.

In step six, the fifth draft, A-2 sometimes makes additional changes during the typing process because he's reading it again and sometimes something doesn't sound right.

Rockville Text 15

A-3: Do you make any changes in it when you type it up?
A-2: Sometimes I do. Sometimes I'll read something and say, "Well that doesn't sound right." Yesterday I was going through some of this and I added a couple of sentences. I imagine every time you rewrite something, you could change something if you wanted to.

At other times, between the fourth and fifth draft, A-2 makes handwritten notes about the fourth draft and will add these notes to another draft. And, when this happens, A-2 types a fifth draft.

In step seven, the critique, both writers search for someone to read and critique their final typed draft to get outside input. In A-1's case, this is the third draft, and in A-2's case, the fourth or fifth. Many times they will let each other critique their writing during this activity because they could not find another critiquer and now have a regularly scheduled time to critique each other's writing. A-1 wants the critiquer to "fix the mechanics," "look at the piece," and tell him "if it reads well."

Rockville Text 16

A-1: This is all to teach me to write. A-2 can critique it and that will help me. I had A-2 read it. And like I told him, maybe it's not quiet as interesting as some of my other stories because there is less action.

A-2 wants the critiquer to go over the story, and add input by making suggestions in the margins of the typed copy. If the story doesn't read well, "tell me why."

Rockville Text 17

A-2: It don't do me any good if I can't see the critique marks. For example, I sent my book to a publisher. They returned it. I re-wrote it and cut first three chapters. Now the original fourth chapter is the first chapter.

Both evaluates all critiqued work, and then makes final decision.

In step eight, the final draft, both writers are ready to make the final copy, a draft ready for its final destination, whether it be to a peer-review group in another town, a magazine publisher, or a book publisher. This draft is printed or typed and otherwise prepared according to guidelines requested by publishers (Writer's Digest, 1990). The content of the writing is not changed.

Rockville Text 18

A-2: I can see improvement from A-1's first writing. In my opinion, I suppose the only thing he seems to be having the most trouble with is how to make it flow. The sentences are not any good, but sometimes a changed word or a re-arranged word makes it sound better. The mechanics. It's just up to him to do it, whatever he can, quick as he can.

Step nine, beyond the final draft, is the time of heartache and frustration, the time of rejection slips for

there are many more "turn downs" than successes, the back side of the affect continuum.

Rockville Text 19

A-2: I wonder about publishers, the rejection slip that I got said that in spite of your book's merit, we don't have a place for it on our list. I wonder what that means?

Neither writer has been published; therefore, neither has experienced the front end of the continuum, joy and exhilaration. During the wait, A-1 and A-2 started other writing projects.

Discussion

The most obvious thing that can be said about this study is that these two adults' writing process is in a state of constant change. I did capture their process in this study, but that does not mean they will take the same steps the next time someone studies their writing. Perhaps what this teaches those who teach writing and are interested in the writing process is that they will be more effective if we teach our students there is more than one way to write.

The three of us were not established writers and had little writing practice, but we were willing to learn from each other. Conventional writing mistakes were made, but through peer talk, we listened to each other and made improvement. Perhaps this speaks to Vygosky's (1978) approach to learning. A-1 and A-2 became better writers with the help of each other. Although I did not write a story, I feel that I gained much knowledge about writing because I was around these two adults for a long period of

time. Hopefully, as the three of us grow as writers, we can do some things alone that we did well together.

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